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ABSTRACT

The limitations of objectives tests, the language skills needed for university work, and effective ways of appraising and communicating these skills to the university are discussed. The goals of university English as a second language (ESL) programs is to train international students in the linguistic and academic skills they will need in American universities. This goal is complicated by objective language tests. Such factors as cheating, test coaching, testing emphasis upon language recognition and not production, cultural bias, test interpretation, and test anxiety often cause a discrepancy between test scores and actual ESL potential. Some of the skills that are needed by university students but are inadequately tested by objective tests include reading, writing, listening, oral production, and study skills. It is necessary to evaluate the student's proficiency in these skills in addition to an objective test score in order to determine university admittance. Therefore, ESL teachers should insist that testmakers continue to improve the objective tests and to promote the acceptance of skill-based evaluations of students' proficiency by admission officers. (RW)

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A Complement to Testing: Skill-Based Appraisal

Laura Latulippe Mary Lu Light

The purpose of university ESL programs is to train foreign students to perform linguistic tasks in the university. Objective tests used as determiners of admission to most universities, however complicate, and at times preclude efforts to fulfill this purpose. The student's goal is often to obtain a sufficient score on the MTELP or TOEFL, not to absorb the needed skills.

At present, objective tests are used almost exclusively to determine university preparedness. Testing experts admit the statistical accuracy of these tests is limited, and we question the value of the information they do test in determining university success.

We would like to show the limitations of objective tests, summarize the language skills needed for university work, and discuss effective ways of appraising and communicating these skills to the university

We propose that:

1. Test makers expand their tests to include relevant university language skills evaluation, eg. note-taking lecture listening.

2. Language institutes devise a consistent method of evaluating and communicating these skills to admission people as a complement to improve objective tests.

3. ESL teachers undertake a campaign to make admission people aware of objective test limitations and the need for using teacher-based evaluations as complements.

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A Complement to Testing: Skill-Based Appraisal

The goal of university ESL programs is to train international students in the linguistic and academic skills they will need in American universities. This goal is complicated by, and at times, precluded by the objective language tests used to determine international students' admission to universities. Because of the emphasis placed on objective test scores, such as those of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a second goal is being imposed upon students and university ESL programs. This is the goal of obtaining high test scores which do not necessarily reflect an ability to succeed in the university.

The difference between what is actually being tested by these objective tests and what is needed in the university, suggests that a high test score will not assure success in the university. At best these tests are a limited indicator of the students' knowledge of English; they do not indicate much about the students' academic skills.

We feel that the conflict between the goal of training students for the university and this imposed goal of training students to obtain high test scores is interfering with our work of helping students to succeed in the university. The purpose of this paper is to A) discuss the limits of the tests, B) discuss the skills necessary for university work, C) propose an alternative to the current situation, and D) outline some suggestions for ESL teachers who wish to change the situation.

LIMITS OF TESTING

The two most frequently used tests, MTELP and TOEFL contain several components or sub-tests that are averaged together to give a single test score used by admissions officers. The components of the currently-used MTELP include; a sentence level aural comprehension test, a recognition test of sentence level grammar, a recognition test of non-contextualized vocabulary from the 4000-6000 word level and a reading comprehension test of paragraphs on subjects often unrelated to the academic needs of international students. In addition, the official form of the MTELP includes a writing sample and an oral interview.

Recently the University of Michigan English Language Institute has revised the MTELP and renamed it The Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB). The MELAB is a step forward in testing English for academic purposes. While the composition section remains unchanged, the listening portion now contains three parts: aural grammar, aural emphasis, and dialogue/lecture. The dialogue/lecture section allows students to take notes on a short lecture or dialogue and use these notes to answer multiple choice questions about a visual related to the talk. The third part of the test contains a multiple choice grammar section, a multiple choice cloze passage, a vocabulary section and reading passages. The format of the reading passages is the same, but the content has been changed to include natural science, popular psychology, technology subjects and biology. This new content is a more appropriate test of the type of reading that foreign students will do in their university classes. The MELAB is an improvement over the old MTELP, but it is currently used only at the University of Michigan.

The TOEFL includes a listening comprehension test containing three subsections: a statement requiring that the examinee choose a statement that is similar in meaning, a short conversation followed by a question for which the examinee must choose the answer, and short talks followed by questions, for

which the student must choose the answer. It also has a section of structure and written expression containing two sub-sections: a test of sentence level grammar recognition and a recognition test of non-acceptable words or phrases in sentence level written material. The third sub-section is reading comprehension and vocabulary, including sentence level recognition of vocabulary and questions about academically oriented paragraphs.

The objective tests do not test oral production; textbook reading; the use of the library and other academic resources; the writing of academic papers or essay test answers, which are needed for university success; and lecture listening, perhaps the most important language skill, is tested only in a limited way.

There are several factors that limit objective tests in their ability to determine university preparedness, some of which are inherent in the tests themselves, and others which are a result of the way in which the test scores are interpreted. These factors fall into two categories: those which unjustifiably raise scores and consequently help students gain admission when they are not ready, and those which lower scores and prevent capable students from being admitted to the university. We will consider each category separately.

One of the factors that raises scores unjustifiably is bad test security. This includes both cheating during the exam and obtaining a copy of the test before it is given. Although the major test producers have made progress in eliminating most of these problems, isolated cases do exist.

Scores can also be raised by practice and coaching. Students who take the test frequently, will usually increase their scores even if their knowledge of English has not increased. In addition, coaching for these tests can raise the score. After taking a special TOEFL preparation class (200 hours) at Florida State University, students were able to raise their scores an average of 106 points. (Jenks, 1980) Even when the test score is not significantly

raised by this coaching, the problem is that students put time and energy into practice and coaching believing this will help, time and energy that should be spent learning the academic English skills they will need after they are admitted.

A third score-raising factor, possibly the most important in terms of university admission, is that objective language tests can measure only the recognition of language and not the production of it. We, as language teachers are aware of the difference, but those who interpret the scores and use them to determine admittance are not always aware.

The final score-raising factor is the guessing effect, which, although it is not a major problem, should be considered when test scores are used to indicate a student's readiness for the university.

Cultural bias is the first factor that unjustifiably lowers scores and prevents deserving students from entering the university. This includes bias in the test material and in the format of the test. The reading comprehension section of objective language tests frequently contains paragraphs dealing with American history and literature. Few international students plan to study in these areas. The Institute of International Education's 1980-81 Census of Foreign Students indicates that the largest percentage, 25.8% of international students in the U.S. are studying engineering. The second most popular subject is business and management accounting for 17.4% of the students, followed by 8.1% who are undecided about their area of study and 7.8% studying social science. (Boyan, 1981) Why should they be asked to demonstrate competence in reading subject matter to which they may have only marginal exposure in their university work? Another aspect of cultural bias is the format of the tests. Students who come from countries that do not use objective testing methods are at a disadvantage when taking this type of test for the first time.

The second factor that lowers scores and hinders admission is score interpretation. Due to the statistical error of measure (SEM), an objective test

score does not represent an exact score, but rather a range within which the score falls. The TOEFL, for example, has a SEM of 16 points. Admissions officers who do not know this often set a specific score cut-off for admission, and, as a result they don't admit students who have scores falling in the same range as students who are admitted.

The last factor contributing to lower scores is test anxiety. Because these test scores are frequently the final determiners of admission, and therefore of students' futures, they experience much anxiety during testing. Studies indicate that high anxiety can lower test scores. (Madsen, 1981) The tests that are used to determine our students' futures, are limited in their ability to measure students' English and, do not test the skills which may be the most necessary for success in the university. Language production is difficult to test reliably, but this does not mean that the productive skills can be ignored. They must be considered to determine students' ability to succeed in American universities.

SKILLS NEEDED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

During the process of revising the curricula for our various programs, many ESL teachers have completed needs assessment to determine what language skills are necessary for the study areas of their students. The results of several of these assessments have been published, (Ostler, 1980) (Lee, 1979) and our own survey had similar results. Many skills that are needed by our students in the university are inadequately tested or not tested at all by the current objective tests. These skills can be divided into five categories; reading skills, writing skills, listening skills, oral production skills and study skills.

Rather than reading isolated paragraphs, as students must prove their ability to do on objective tests, our students in the university must have all

of the skills necessary to read college level textbooks and scholarly articles. They must be able to identify main ideas and relate them to supporting details, to skim, scan, understand reference words and connectives, make inferences, distinguish fact from opinion, use context clues and word analysis to guess the meanings of new words, recognize the function of a text and the point of view and plan of authors, synthesize the text with previous knowledge and synthesize information from various sources. (Hamp-Lyons, 1982)

In the university, our students need to do more than write unified, coherent paragraphs. They must be able to write rapidly, paraphrase ideas that they hear in lectures as notes, and use these notes to write clear, essay question answers within the time limit of a fifty minute class. Most of our students will be required to write summaries, abstracts, and term papers all of which require skill in paraphrasing and organizing ideas. Finally, some students are required to produce lab reports, research proposals, critiques and resumes. Each specialized form of writing could, of course, be learned after admittance to the university, but, without the complex writing skills that underlie all of these forms of writing, students have a disadvantage competing with their American counterparts.

The most important group of listening skills are those needed during class lectures. The student needs to recognize the organization of lectures; listen for the important ideas (generalizations), which entails understanding rhetorical phrases (consequently, the former, on one hand), and recognizing verbal and non-verbal cues to key ideas (a change in voice, a gesture, or a change in movement); and adjust to digressions by the speaker, unfamiliar idioms, and poor speakers. In addition to formal lecture material, students must be able to understand class discussions, as important questions are often asked and answered during the exchange of ideas in a class.

Oral production is also necessary for success. Students must at least be able to ask questions of instructors about lectures and reading material, and many students find it necessary to participate in class discussions from which they are partially evaluated. Many, especially graduate students, must be able to give well-organized and clearly stated oral reports in class, which is different from merely reading a paper. International students need to be especially obvious in their organization and clear in pointing out key ideas, as they have the added burden of an accent to which the instructor and other students may have trouble adjusting.

The final category of skills consists of language-related study skills needed by all students in any study area. These include using the library effectively; using a dictionary and thesaurus to check spelling, meaning, and exact usage; and being able to proof-read and correct one's own papers. Our students also need to know how to take several varieties of tests (essay, multiple choice, fill-in), and they must be able to use language effectively (including body language and levels of language) to get help from fellow students, instructors, and librarians.

EVALUATING SKILLS

As we have determined the needs of our students, we ESL teachers have created materials to teach the needed skills. We have written books that teach students to write for academic purposes, and we have written many excellent reading books that teach our students all of the skills needed for academic reading. As we use these books and add to them our own exercises and tests, we evaluate the students' progress. Our evaluation of their skills consists of various types of assessment over a long period of time rather than a two hour objective test, the outcome of which is influenced by even more variables than those operating in the classroom.

The skills that are needed to write a term paper, for example, can best be evaluated during the process of writing it so that each step can be evaluated. The teacher learns if students have adequate library skills by interacting with them as they use the library. Even the one skill of paraphrasing needs to be both taught and evaluated step-by-step, from recognizing a paraphrase in an exercise, to using connectors to paraphrase sentences, to the final step of paraphrasing whole sequences of ideas and synthesizing ideas from several sources. The process of editing the paper is aided and evaluated by the teacher working with the student, and the final paper can then be graded and compared with university standards. This total evaluation determines a student's ability to produce a term paper as accurately as possible.

Oral reports can be evaluated while they are presented in class, with forms that focus on all the points of a good oral report- clear purpose, well-substantiated points, good use of connectors, etc. One such form was suggested by Christine Meloni and Shirley Thompson. (Meloni and Thompson, 1980) In addition to teacher evaluation, the audience of students can be asked to show their understanding of the points presented by filling in a very basic outline of the report. If members of the audience cannot determine the main points, the speaker knows that the points were not clearly made.

ESP classes can be excellent places to evaluate several skills. Textbook reading in a specific study area can be taught and evaluated by using actual materials, teaching and evaluating knowledge of rhetorical style, vocabulary, text organization, and the use of the bibliography and footnotes in addition to general comprehension. The material can be discussed in class allowing the teacher to evaluate students' ability in class discussion and questioning. And, finally, ability in different types of test-taking can be determined by testing students' knowledge of subjects studied using each form of test.

COMMUNICATING EVALUATIONS

We feel that an evaluation of the students' proficiency in the above-mentioned skills should be used in addition to an objective test score to determine university admittance. One way of communicating this evaluation is a skills checklist. This list could contain the skills needed in the university and an evaluation by the students' teachers of their level of attainment in each skill. Admission officers could decide what level is needed in each skill area for admittance, depending on the student's area of study. The checklist at the end of this paper has been used to evaluate students at our Advanced level. This form contains the student's objective test scores, but it emphasizes teacher evaluation of the skills necessary to the students' academic future. The skills checklist can be revised as the program curriculum is revised.

There are, of course, problems that can arise with using something as "subjective" as a skills checklist, but we think they can be satisfactorily dealt with. The decision of whether or not a student can perform a certain skill may vary from teacher to teacher, depending on the teacher's understanding of what is meant by this skill and how accomplished a student must be at the skill in order to succeed in the university. But the checklists could be standardized and a clear description of what is meant by each level and each skill could be provided. Actual samples of satisfactory work in addition to written descriptions should make the standard clear. Also teachers who will be doing the evaluation could be required to attend workshops that would train them to use the checklists in a standard way.

Another problem is that admission people might interpret the skills checklist differently. But again, they could be trained and assisted as the teachers are to make meaning clear. A final suggestion to avoid possible problems is that the evaluation of university skills should be done at the advanced level of a program, using university level materials so that the evaluation has

meaning and can better be used to predict future success. The fact that a student is able to comprehend the main ideas and relate them to supporting ideas in reading material at an intermediate level, does not necessarily mean that the student can do the same thing with a college text chapter.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

As ESL teachers there are several things we can do to insure that our future students will be evaluated more completely and fairly, and to help our own programs by clarifying program goals. First, we can insist that testmakers continue to improve the objective tests. Admissions officers will probably continue to rely heavily on objective tests in the future, because they deal with large numbers of people and need a fast and efficient means of determining university preparedness. Therefore, it is vital that the major test producers aim at improving the tests to include relevant skills.

Future tests should be designed to test English for academic purposes and not only general proficiency in English. These tests should include subject matter from all the major academic areas: such as the humanities, sciences, and business. To whatever extent it is possible while retaining validity, realiability, and practicality, they should test language skills and not merely language items, particularly in the area of vocabulary. They should include a sample of the student's written language while performing an academic task, which could be forwarded to the admitting university along with the other test scores.

An acceptable objective test is a goal that will not be achieved in a short time, but it is imperative that testmakers pursue this goal.

The second step ESL teachers can take to improve the current process is to work toward getting skill-based evaluations of students' proficiency accepted by admission officers in addition to objective test scores. To do this, we need to work together to create standardized checklists for intensive English programs to complete and send to admission offices along with test scores. This

task includes not only making the list, but also writing the descriptions of each skill and level and agreeing upon student examples that fit each category Secondly, we need to set up workshops to train teachers to use the checklists and use them in our programs to test and revise them. Then we need to work with the university admission people to get them to accept these checklists. We need to point out to them the inadequacies of objective tests as the sole predicters of university success. We need to show them the standardized checklists complete with descriptions and examples, explain that teachers have been trained to use them effectively, and offer to let them observe classes in which this on-going evaluation process is occurring. This personal lobbying approach can help to build the trust that is necessary to allow skill-based evaluation to work.

University ESL programs should be training international students in the linguistic and academic skills they need to succeed in American universities. Because attitudes toward current objective tests hinder this goal in addition to causing difficult problems for our students, we would like to change the admission policies being used today. We make the preceeding observations and suggestions with the hope that we can all work toward this end.

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April 22, 1983 LEVEL: ADVANCED II STUDENT'S NAME: _____

THE CAREER ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTER
FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS - WMU PROGRESS REPORT
Winter II Session 1983

RESEARCH CLASS Instructor: VAN HARE	ACCEPTABLE FOR COLLEGE WORK:		
Attendance: hours present: ____ hours absent: ____	NO	ALMOST	YES
Able to: -adequately paraphrase materials for research:			
-write a clear, logical outline of material gathered for research:			
-locate various research sources in the library:			
-write a well-organized and documented 4 page research paper:			
-give an oral report based on the research paper:			
Comments: CLASS EVALUATION FOR ADVANCED LEVEL:			

WRITING CLASS INSTRUCTOR: DLOUHY	ACCEPTABLE FOR COLLEGE WORK:		
Attendance: Hours present: ____ Hours absent: ____	NO	ALMOST	YES
Able to: -paraphrase college level reading material in writing:			
-summarize college level reading material in writing:			
-write a clear, well-organized paper with an introduction, well-supported body and conclusion:			
-use English grammar and sentence structure adequately:			
-edit and correct own work:			
COMMENTS: CLASS EVALUATION FOR ADVANCED LEVEL:			

READING CLASS INSTRUCTOR: KEESLER	ACCEPTABLE FOR COLLEGE WORK:		
Attendance: Hours present: ____ Hours absent: ____	NO	ALMOST	YES
Able to: -read and comprehend college level material:			
-read college level material with sufficient speed:			
-use context clues to determine word meanings:			
-read for general, specific and implied meaning:			
COMMENTS: CLASS EVALUATION FOR ADVANCED LEVEL:			

SPEAKING AND LISTENING CLASS INSTRUCTOR: LATULIPPE	ACCEPTABLE FOR COLLEGE WORK:		
Attendance: Hours present: ____ Hours Absent: ____	NO	ALMOST	YES
Able to: -understand the main ideas of a short lecture:			
-organize lecture notes and use them effectively in a test situation:			
-express ideas clearly in group discussions:			
-use understandable English pronunciation:			
Comments: CLASS EVALUATION FOR ADVANCED LEVEL:			

STUDENT PROFILE: Academic motivation and willingness to learn English.

LEVEL COORDINATOR: LATULIPPE

MICHIGAN TEST RESULTS:

MTELP AURAL

Not valid without seal.

Eric/CII SEP 16 1983